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Branching Out to Meet the Needs Of Our Students: A Model For Oral Communication Assessment And Curriculum Programs

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Over the course of the last two decades, colleges and universities across the United States have been charged with the task of establishing courses in oral communication as an integral part of general education curricula. From the outset, communication educators have been aware that there are students in the American education system whose related abilities, for one reason or another, fall into skill and anxiety-related typologies ranging from remedial needs to those who possess advanced communication competencies. However, these same educators have had a difficult time assessing communication competence levels of students. In many cases, students who have specialized, skill-relevant needs have been thrust into classroom environments which have not been conducive to individual success.

Ironically, the post-secondary education community developed systems of assessment many years ago to evaluate students (for example, in the areas of mathematics, English and foreign languages) for the sole purpose of placing individuals into classes that fit their skill levels. It is no secret that as the global community is governed by greater levels of complexity, effective communication becomes an increasing prerequisite for

personal and professional success. Students require and deserve learning environments that will cultivate expected levels of communication skills. As the Wing-spread Group on Higher Education so aptly contends, "An increasingly open, global economy requires — absolutely requires — that all of us be better educated, more skilled, more adaptable, and more capable of working collaboratively. Economic considerations alone mean that we must change the ways we teach and learn" (Brock 1993, p. 4).

There is increasing evidence to suggest that at-risk students (e.g., those who are challenged by academic deficits or social-anxiety constraints) are likely to drop out of high school and post-secondary institutions because specialized needs are not identified, and when they are identified, programs designed to meet the special needs of these populations have been scarce. According Chesebro, et al. (1992), "effective oral communication is likely to play a critical role in reversing the outcome predicted for at-risk students. In dealing with at-risk students, the educational mission cannot only be to achieve excellence; it also should be designed to attain inclusiveness."

Although insufficient data exist regarding the factors encouraging retention rates among high school and post-secondary institutions, a recent study published by Statistics Canada (1995) reports that more than 16.9% of students left school prematurely because they had problems speaking in front of a class and 10.9% claimed to be socially intimidated by teachers or peers. There is evidence to suggest there are measures we can and should be taking to encourage retention among our students. And yet, due to limited financial, personnel and temporal resources, appropriate assessment of the specialized needs of incoming students (e.g., levels of oral communication competencies and communication ap-

prehension) remains underdeveloped and often neglected.

Diverse publications focusing on the subject of assessing oral communication have surfaced in recent years (see for example Christ, 1994; Morreale & Backlund, 1996; Morreale et al., 1993) and there are institutions from community colleges to large universities which have made attempts to implement programs of this nature. In June 1996, after years of envisioning and planning, Western Carolina University implemented a program which responds to the call for oral communication assessment followed by the development of specialized courses designed to meet outcomes of the assessment process.

Screening the communication competencies of incoming students is only one dimension of a multi-faceted plan for encouraging increased levels of communication competence at Western Carolina University. For example, while other characteristics have been identified, few descriptions of the attitudes and skill levels of academically at-risk students regarding communication have been provided. In an effort to address this oversight, the purpose of this article is to provide a description of the oral communication assessment and course curriculum programs at Western Carolina. Additionally, in order to describe the development of these programs, a review of recent efforts to refocus the priorities of oral communication education, as an integral part of general education at this institution is included.

BACKGROUND

The General Education Program and Oral Communication

The modern era of Western Carolina University's general education program began in 1990 and since that time many developmental steps have taken place. General education at Western Carolina University requires students to take a total of 41 semester hours from ten areas of specialization: 16 hours from Foundations (which includes English, Math, Oral Communication, Computer Literacy and Leisure and Fitness) and 25 from Perspectives (which includes Social Sciences and Contemporary Institutions, Physical and Biological Sciences, The Humanistic Experience, Comparative Cultures and the Human Past). In the Foundations courses, "students receive instruction in basic subjects needed to succeed in subsequent courses or in such life skills as fitness, leisure and computer literacy" (General Education Booklet, 1996, p. 1). In the Perspectives courses, "students encounter subject matter in areas which the faculty has agreed must be understood by educated people at this time in history" (p. 1).

All of the courses in the General Education program require that certain criteria be met for satisfactory completion of each requirement. In the present system, students enrolled in any General Education course are required to give oral presentations and complete a specified number of written assignments. Additionally, all General Education courses must address problem solving, scientific method, critical interpretation, interpreting values, logical reasoning and reference and resource skills.

The dilemma facing the faculty in 1990 was that the Foundations 3, "Oral Communication" (hereafter referred to as F3) section of the program was comprised of 12 different courses (all under the title of Thinking, Reasoning and Expressing), taught in 12 departments under 12 sets of standards (see list below).

Content Criteria for a Course Proposal in Oral Communication (F3)

A course proposal in oral communication must contain and/or provide instruction in the following:

- Identification of the components of audience analysis and application of these to a speaking event.
- Introduction to, and identification of, persuasive techniques in speech.
- Introduction to the principles of group and interpersonal communication.
- Development of research skills to support topics chosen for speeches.
- Emphasis on the role of critical thinking or logic in the preparation of oral messages: analysis, evaluation, construction of the argument (synthesis), and valuing of the material and the speech.
- Instruction in presentational styles and techniques, including gestures, appearance, movements, other nonverbal factors as well as modes of delivery.
- Multiple opportunities to engage in oral communication before a group of peers for at least 3 to 5 minutes.
- Deliver at least one speech of persuasion before a group of peers.

- Engage in one written analysis of a contemporary speech.
- Engage in one exercise in group presentation.
- Provide at least one opportunity for students to evaluate peers.

All of the courses were developed to meet department-specific skills and lacked clear focus regarding the most obvious objective of oral communication education, which is to develop well trained, competent communicators (in the specific contexts of interpersonal, small group, and public speaking). Some examples of the twelve-class system included courses in astronomy, economics, law, philosophy, psychology and political science. Another factor that persuaded Western's faculty to focus on F3 was the realization that students who were potentially reticent regarding communication situations or in need of remedial, skill-intensive instruction were opting to take one of the F3 equivalent courses which for one reason or another, did not involve public speaking assignments.

In April 1993, the faculty proposed the current curriculum for F3 which had been cut to eight classes (and subsequently to five options). Further, the faculty decided that beginning in the Fall of 1997, F3 courses would focus only on oral communication contexts and limit classes to 25 students or less. Specifically, only two classes, Introduction to Speech Communication (CMHC 201) and Oral Communication (BA 204), a Business Administration section of oral communication, will be offered as options to fulfill the F3 requirement.

In addition to streamlining the F3 General Education requirement, the faculty also recognized the need to appoint a Director of Oral Communication Competence who is responsible for developing, implementing and supervising the administration of F3 courses, ex-

cuting an oral communication assessment plan to structure and feed these courses and serving as the chairperson for an Oral Communication Faculty Focus Group.

WESTERN'S FIVE-BRANCH ORAL COMMUNICATION PROGRAM

The anchor for the assessment and placement process at Western Carolina University is a five-branch oral communication curriculum. The branches are designed to identify and describe the levels of oral communication competence and apprehension of students and to meet corresponding academic needs. The branches are not hierarchical; rather they describe the dimensions of oral communication competence which are all different, yet grow from the same roots.

The branch system is designed to assist students across competence levels to fulfill the F3 requirement for general education. Recommendations for placement in one of the five branches are based on analyses of self-report measures, parent reports and observer assessments collected during freshman orientation. Specifically, recommendations are sent to students and advisors prior to registration for the spring semester in order to encourage appropriate class enrollment decisions. Descriptions of each branch of the program are described in this manuscript.

Branch One

Students who have been admitted to the Honors College or who self-report sufficient training and experience in oral communication, including the contexts of

interpersonal, small group, and public speaking, and who have been assessed as behaviorally competent by trained observers, are invited to take an Honors section of the course. Multiple sections of the Honors branch will be offered to accommodate students who are not reticent and those who have been identified as potentially reticent. Honors sections of the course have a maximum enrollment of 20 students.

Branch Two

Students who self-report significant levels of communication apprehension across communication contexts or in the context of public speaking alone, and who have been assessed as potentially reticent by trained observers, may opt to fulfill their oral communication general education requirement in a section designed for reticent communicators. It should be noted that this decision is optional; although assessment instruments and observations may identify a student as potentially reticent, the final decision to pursue specialized training rests with the individual. Students identified as potentially reticent are invited to meet with the instructors of reticent sections of the course for an assessment interview. This interview is the final screening method of assessment for the student; he or she may not enroll in the course without attending an interview.

Prior to registration each semester, letters are sent to the advisors of identified students, as well as the students themselves, explaining the reticent program. If a student is interested in the course, he or she is responsible for scheduling an assessment interview. Kelly, Phillips, & Keaten (1995) explained the reason for using the screening interview and offer a detailed description of the interview agenda (pp. 29-31). The approach of

using screening interviews requires students to discuss their communication difficulties so the instructor can identify skill deficiencies. As Kelly, Phillips, & Keaten (1995) noted, "the screening interview is a standardized procedure designed to identify individuals who have problems communicating across situations and individuals who have a severe fear of public speaking and speaking out in groups" (p. 31).

The Reticent Communicator Program has been developed to address specific problems in communication within academic, social and professional contexts (e.g., social communication skills, interacting with authority figures and class participation). In the Reticent Communicator Program, "students are expected to work with the instructor in order to prioritize individual goals to accomplish communication tasks which they have been reluctant to try and unable to do" (Kelly, Phillips, & Keaten, 1995, p. 265). It is important to note that the Reticent Communicator Program implemented at Western Carolina University has been developed using the original Pennsylvania State University Reticent Program (Phillips, 1991) as a guide.

Branch Three

Students who self-report the need for a Skill-Intensive Program and who have been identified by trained observers as potentially in need of basic skill-intensive instruction may opt to complete their oral communication general education requirement in these intensive, skill-based sections. These students will have indicated that they have received minimal training regarding oral communication skills. Further, these students will have been identified as not significantly reticent or apprehensive; rather, they are in need of non-reticent, skill-

specific instruction. Like the Reticent-Communicator Program, the final decision to pursue this type of specialized instruction is also left up to the student. Students who fit the criteria for this branch will be notified of which predesignated sections may best meet their needs. The primary difference between this branch of the program and standard sections is the text selected and specialized pedagogy. In the Skill Intensive course, the focus is on competence development at the most basic level.

Branch Four

Students who are not invited to enroll in an Honors section and those who have not been identified as potentially reticent or in need of Skill-Intensive instruction, will be asked to register for predesignated, general sections of approved General Education F3 courses.

Branch Five

After a student has completed his or her oral communication requirement, and receives two Oral Communication Condition (OCC) marks (indicated in conjunction with final grades) from two different instructors, he or she will be required to register for a remediation course, designed to revisit and reemphasize oral communication skills in the contexts of group process and public speaking.

Any faculty member who has determined that the student has failed to meet acceptable outcomes, may assign an OCC mark. Each undergraduate who receives two OCC marks prior to the semester in which they complete 110 hours required to pass the "Foundations of

Oral Communication” before they are eligible to graduate. The purpose of this course is to provide a follow-up, skill-intensive course for students identified as needing additional instruction in the cognitive and behavioral components of oral communication.

The Oral Communication Program at Western Carolina University supports the belief of the Wing-spread Group (1993):

Skills such as written and oral communication, critical analysis, interpersonal competence, the ability to obtain and use data and the capacity to make informed judgments are essential attributes of a liberal education. When they are accompanied by discipline-based knowledge, these skills can be learned. If they are to be learned, however, they must be taught and practiced, not merely absorbed as a result of unplanned academic experience. We believe that the modern world requires both knowledge and such skills and competencies. (p. 15)

It is our extended belief that skills are not always mastered following a student's first exposure to them. The remediation course is a stopgap, a follow-up opportunity to encourage the development of oral communication skills.

We recognize that instructors across the university may not feel confident regarding their decisions to recommend a student for remedial instruction. In order to support faculty members, Cutspec (1996) created a resource document designed to guide such decisions. This document conceptualizes and operationalizes basic oral communication skills. Additionally, an instrument to assess oral communication presentations is included to provide a tool that will allow consistency across the university curriculum. The assessment instrument circulated is a modified version of *The Competent Speaker*

Speech Evaluation Form (Morreale et al., 1993). This is the same instrument used in F3 courses to evaluate student presentations. One of our goals is to promote a strong core program coupled with consistent assessment techniques across the discipline.

THE ORAL COMMUNICATION ASSESSMENT PROGRAM AT WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

Evolution

Phase One. The first phase of the Oral Communication Assessment program was implemented during the Fall of 1995, and involved only student self-report measures: the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) and the Willingness to Communicate Scale (WTC) were disseminated during the fall semester in introductory-level English courses. The purpose of this initial assessment was to test for affective levels of communication apprehension in order to identify students who were potential candidates for a pilot section of the Reticent Program.

A total of 769 students completed both instruments, and the results indicated 130 students as potential candidates for the pilot reticent-communicator course (PRCA: $M = 66.3$, $S.D. = 17.5$, Cronbach's Alpha = .88; WTC: $M = 69.2$, $S.D. = 17.4$, Cronbach's Alpha = .90). The number of identified candidates (17 percent of those surveyed) is slightly below the normative mean (20 percent of individuals historically surveyed) regarding students who possess very high levels of trait-like communication apprehension (Richmond & McCroskey, 1995, p. 44).

However, due to faculty resource limitations, only the 70 students who scored highest on the PRCA and lowest on the WTC were invited to consider the pilot section of the reticent communicator course. Of these 70, 30 students participated in assessment interviews and 11 enrolled in the course. Fifteen of the remaining 19 students had scheduling conflicts and four were evaluated as inappropriate candidates for the course. Our initial assessment effort was successful; the first section of a course for reticent communicators was offered during the Spring of 1996.

It is interesting to note the options selected by the 40 students who did not opt to participate in interviews for the reticent course. Twenty of these students selected courses that are still acceptable options for fulfilling the F3 requirement. The classes the majority selected are large, lecture-type classes that do not require presentations. Fifteen of the original 40 students have yet to fulfill any option of F3 and five have completed standard sections of the basic communication course (three of these five students chose not to complete the public speaking requirements of the class and settled for a lower grade).

Phase Two. The second phase of the assessment plan, implemented during the 1996 summer orientation, included parental and observer assessments in addition to student self-report data. The utilization of parent-report data is an innovative approach to oral communication assessment. The reason underlying our decision to test this source of data is twofold. First, parents observe the behavior of their children across a wide variety of contexts and therefore may be able to achieve a balance in their assessment decisions. Second, we thought it would be interesting to see how parental data correlates with student self-report data and observer assessments. If the resulting correlations are significant, we will have

uncovered a novel source for data collection (a follow-up manuscript exploring the relevance of this data is in progress).

In addition to parental assessments, observer ratings have been incorporated into the program. According to *Criteria For The Assessment of Oral Communication* (The National Communication Association, 1993), methods of assessment should be consistent with the skills being assessed and performance skills must be assessed through actual performance. Backlund (1994) contended that the best "assessment tests are those that assess behavior directly" (p. 208). While self-report instruments are particularly useful in gathering attitudinal and affective information (Backlund, 1994) and parental assessments add a historical or longitudinal perspective, observer ratings or performance measures may be the strongest source of validity in a large-scale assessment program. While a lengthy discussion of the logistical and reliability concerns regarding observer ratings is beyond the scope of this manuscript, our program has been successful in recognizing and working to overcome these potential limitations. Additionally, the results of the first inclusion of these instruments indicates high reliability values (Parent's Assessment form, Cronbach's Alpha = .89; Observer's Assessments, Cronbach's Alpha = .98).

The primary purpose of both additional data collection methods was to increase the reliability and validity of the results discerned across the assessment process by triangulating the outcomes. This effort was successful in identifying individuals who are candidates for reticent instruction, basic, skill- intensive instruction, standard instruction or test out opportunities.

Phase Three. The final phase of the assessment plan was implemented in the Summer of 1997. Due to the strength of the results interpreted from the instru-

ments used in Phase Two, no changes were made. Following this assessment program, all of the existing F3 options were eliminated and all incoming first-year students are required to select a branch of one of the two basic communication courses to fulfill the oral communication general education requirement.

PURPOSE

Focusing on the needs of students, the purpose of oral communication assessment at Western Carolina University is to provide data that can be used for diagnosing communication strengths and weaknesses and for advising and placement purposes. The student makes course choices or receive other support or assistance based on the assessment results. When instruments are administered before and after a given course or experience, students can evaluate their development based on the dimension of competency assessed. Further, when observer ratings are incorporated (pre- and post- course or experience) the reliability of the assessment is enhanced. These data can be used for the following purposes (The National Communication Association, 1993).

First, the results of the assessment process can be used by instructors to revise both course content and pedagogy. Specifically, the differences in students' pre- and post- scores can provide direction for restructuring the learning experience on an ongoing basis.

Second, program administrators can use the triangulated results of the assessment measures in several ways. For example, we are in the process of tracking students who have been identified as being at risk for the purpose of addressing retention issues.

Finally, results of the assessment process can be used to evaluate and redirect academic courses and programs. These same results can be used to demonstrate the efficacy of such courses and programs (for a thorough description of criteria for the use of assessment results, see *The National Communication Association's Criteria for the Assessment of Oral Communication*, 1993).

LOGISTICAL COMPONENTS OF THE PROGRAM

With the development of an assessment and placement program of this magnitude, a focus on logistics is paramount. The decisions made by the Program Administrators involved the development of a manual used to guide participants and administrators (Cutspec and Abboud, 1996), the financial resources upon which such an initiative depends and the personnel required to turn the wheels of change.

The Assessment Manual

Development of the manual included publishing goals for the program which are succinct, clear and realistic. The second component of the document is a detailed explanation of the five branches of the oral communication program as it relates to students and the outcomes of their oral communication assessments. Developers of the manual also took the time to include guidelines for how the assessment process unfolds to the extent that they outlined in detail the internal functions of the small group discussion which serves as a filtering process for students who are identified as candidates for

each of the five branches of the program. Furthermore, the manual details the data collection procedures as well as the purpose for and logistics of parental participation during orientation.

This program prides itself on attention to detail and validity. Therefore, Cutspec and Abboud (1996 & 1997) offer specific descriptions of each assessment instrument as well as the reasons for selecting them. Further, the manual explains how each instrument is used and analyzed in order to aid in the identification of individual student needs.

Another feature included in the manual is that it provides normative guidelines for observers to use in making decisions about the students they observe; it defines all of the items on each survey instrument so that the material is more user friendly.

With so much data to enter, analyze and correlate, it is important that the manual offer a specific outline regarding how data will be interpreted. Each self-report measure, parent measure and observer measure is outlined regarding score ranges as well as parameters for extremes in responses. The manual includes scoring procedures for each instrument and what scores indicate regarding communication competencies. Sections on instrument scoring also include information on longitudinal research and established normative guidelines for means and standard deviations as they pertain to the overall history of the instruments as well as for data previously collected at Western Carolina University.

Financial Considerations

In any institution of higher learning, financial resources are always a concern. Primarily, this program utilizes existing personnel; those who participate do so

voluntarily. Additionally, no financial commitment from the General Education Program is required. Regarding expenses for project materials, since the university has printing facilities on campus, the manual and the survey instruments are produced at minimal cost. Financial resources to cover these expenses are provided by the Office for Student Assessment.

Personnel Resources

From the beginning of the assessment program, it has been unclear exactly how many people would be required to gather and process such an enormous amount of information. The program implemented during the Summer of 1996 included 17 observers, including four communication faculty members, six student interns, one student completing a special projects course, and six student volunteers. In 1997, the program utilized 20 observers, including nine student interns, six special project students, two graduate students from communication disorders, and three volunteers. Also included in different phases of the program were the Director of Assessment from the Office of Academic Affairs and her assistants, and a member of the university's computer center staff who wrote the programs for data input and analysis.

IMPLEMENTATION

During three sessions of orientation in the Summer of 1996 and four in the Summer of 1997, incoming students were assessed regarding their levels of oral communication competencies and degrees of com-

munication apprehension. These assessments are based on three methodological strategies.

The first of these strategies was comprised of three self-report measures including the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA), the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) and an adapted version of the Conversational Skills Rating Scale (CSRS) (Spitzberg, 1995). The second method of data collection involved parents of incoming students who were asked to complete an adapted version of the CSRS to guide them in an assessment of their child's communication competencies. Finally, students were asked to participate in a small-group discussion during which the adapted version of the CSRS was used by trained observers to assess students' verbal and non-verbal communication behaviors.

It is important to note that the items remained consistent regarding the student, parent and observer versions of the CSRS in order to encourage reliability across the assessment instruments. Parents who attended one of the three orientation sessions were asked to fill out the CSRS (Parent Version) during a workshop designed for parents.

The self-report measures and the observer version of the CSRS were administered during the group discussion segment of the orientation program. Forty-five minutes were allowed for the students to fill out the self-reports and observers to complete the CSRS while small groups of students participated in discussions. Due to the initial success demonstrated, the time allotted has been extended to 75 minutes for this segment of the orientation. The topic used to guide the discussions was mailed to prospective students by the office of Academic Affairs several weeks before orientation, allowing the participants an opportunity to cognitively prepare for the exercise.

Groups are limited to approximately fifteen people for several reasons: the evaluators have to be able to manage completing the assessments; the students need an environment conducive to involvement; and the program has to allow everyone involved to have an opportunity to participate in the discussion.

Parents and students who complete the assessment surveys are asked to sign an informed-consent document, which authorizes the use of the data in longitudinal research studies. However, for academic evaluation purposes, the results of the findings were used for placement recommendations regardless of whether or not the participants signed the release forms.

Why go to such extremes? The answer is as basic as the question. According to the National Communication Association's report (1993), it is recommended that the "use of competence assessment as a basis for procedural decisions concerning an individual should, when feasible, be based on multiple sources of information, including direct evidence of actual communication performance, results of formal competence assessment, and measures of individual attitudes toward communication" (p. 2). All three of these contingencies are incorporated into the Oral Communication Assessment Program.

ANALYZING THE DATA

Upon completion of the survey instruments, data from the five documents were loaded into the university's mainframe computer system by the student interns and the special project students. One hundred fifteen characters of data were entered across the five instruments including the name and social security number of the student, a code to represent the sex of the

student and the student's age and name. Additionally, observer codes were included with the observer version of the CSRS. The instruments performed well according to the analyses run (Table 1).

Table 1
Instrument Performance 1996

Variable	Cases	Mean	Standard	Cronbach's Alpha Deviation
PRCA	1000	60.56	16.82	.82
PRPSA	1000	99.36	22.30	.60
CSRS (student)	991	48.97	8.44	.90
CSRS (parent)	472	52.46	7.94	.89
CSRS (observer)	728	39.62	15.32	.98

Instrument Performance 1997

Variable	Cases	Mean	Standard	Cronbach's Alpha Deviation
PRCA	1,160	59.71	16.33	.77
PRPSA	1,143	99.82	22.06	.71
CSRS (student)	1,124	49.38	8.8	.93
CSRS (parent)	445	51.15	8.98	.93
CSRS (observer)	1,548	40.79	13.83	.98

The PRCA

The PRCA is a survey instrument which permits computation of an overall apprehension assessment and

four sub-scores. The sub-scores are related to self-perceived communication apprehension in each of four contexts: group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations and public speaking. However, for our assessment purposes, analysis of the instrument was limited primarily to total assessment scores. Analyses run on the PRCA data included a total score for each student, a calculation of the sample mean and standard deviation, Cronbach's Alpha on the total measure and a selection of students by name and social security number who scored 1.5 standard deviations above and below the sample mean.

Richmond and McCroskey (1995) stated, "as with most personality-type measures, a PRCA-24 score can predict behavior only if a score is extremely high or low; such extreme scores suggest that behavior is influenced as much, if not more, by general feelings about communication than by a specific communication situation" (p. 44). Scores range from 24 to 120. Any score above 65 indicates a more generalized apprehension about communication than the average person. Scores above 80 indicate a very high level of trait-like Communication Apprehension (CA). Scores below 50 indicate a very low level of CA. Extreme scores are abnormal.

The PRPSA

On the PRPSA, the scores range from 34 to 170. For students with scores between 34 and 84, very few public speaking situations will produce anxiety. While scores between 85 and 92 indicate a moderately low level of anxiety about public speaking, some presentational contexts would be likely to arouse anxiety in students with such scores. Scores between 93 and 110 indicate moderate anxiety in most public speaking situations. However, a student in this category has the potential to

overcome the anxiety with training. Students scoring between 111 and 119 are suggestive of a moderately high level of public speaking anxiety. Students in this situation tend to avoid this context of communication.

Analysis of the PRPSA involved the same data analysis guidelines as the PRCA with one exception: the standard value selected for identification of apprehensive students was 1 standard deviation above and below the sample mean rather than 1.5. Typically, to identify specialized populations, the indicator of one standard deviation above or below the sample mean is used as a guide. However, due to faculty resource limitations, in four out of five primary instruments used during the Summer of 1996, we used the value of 1.5 standard deviations above or below the mean.

We recognize that this statistical guide will make the reported numbers of students needing and/or requesting specialized training conservative for this academic year. The only measure we used the value of one standard deviation is the PRPSA. The reason for this differentiated value is that this measure has not been repeatedly tested on large samples. In order to reduce the chances of our students "slipping through the cracks," we want to err on the side of caution.

The CSRS

The most unique component of the assessment program involves the development of a modified version of the CSRS, allowing evaluators to use data not only from students but also from parents and observers. The original 30-item form of the CSRS was developed "to provide a psychometrically sound instrument for assessing interpersonal skills in the context of conversation" (Spitzberg, 1995, p. 1). The original items have been collapsed in order to provide a reliable form that

can be used effectively when observing 15 students in a limited period of time. The resulting 14 items target verbal and nonverbal behaviors across the contexts of interpersonal and small group communication. Because students in the program were not asked to deliver a public speech, it would have been misleading to assign observer ratings to this context of communication behavior. Instead, the adapted measure is designed to guide assessments of operationalized verbal and nonverbal interpersonal and small group communication behaviors (two of the three communication contexts addressed in the F3 requirement).

As Spitzberg (1995) indicated, scoring the original instrument is generally straightforward. The same characteristic applies to the adapted version. The original and revised scales are "intrinsically oriented toward competence rather than incompetence," therefore, the first 14 items can simply be summed, producing a range from 14 to 70, with higher scores indicating increased levels of competence. The fifteenth item, which asks students, parents and observers to make predictive value judgments regarding an indication of the most beneficial program branch for each student, were triangulated with the results generated from the skill items and the results of the PRCA and the PRPSA.

Scores derived from the three versions of the CSRS included total scores for each version, calculation of the sample mean and standard deviation for each version, Cronbach's Alpha for the first 14 items of each version, a selection of students who fell 1.5 standard deviations above and below the sample mean of each version, a selection of students who indicated one on item 15, a selection of students who indicated two on item 15 and a selection of students who indicated four on item 15 (Table 2).

Table 2
CSRS (Student) Item 15: 1996

Value Label	Value	Fre- quency	Per- cent	Valid Per- cent	Cumu- lative Total
Missing	0	26	2.6	2.6	2.6
Remedial, Skill- Intensive Communication Skills Course	1	172	17.2	17.2	19.8
Reticent Communicator Course	2	242	24.2	24.2	44.0
Standard Course	3	486	48.6	48.6	92.6
Test-out Opportunity	4	74	7.4	7.4	100.0
Total		1000	100.0	100.0	

CSRS(Student) Item 15:1997

Value Label	Value	Fre- quency	Per- cent	Valid Per- cent	Cumu- lative Total
Missing	0	53	4.5	4.5	4.5
Skill-Intensity Communication Course	1	171	14.7	14.7	19.2
Reticent Communication	2	247	21.2	21.2	40.2
Standard Course	3	573	49.1	49.1	89.5
Honors Course	4	123	10.5	10.5	100.0
Total		1167	100.0	100.0	

INITIAL RESULTS

Out of 1011 students attending the three orientation sessions in 1996, data were collected on 1000. Specifically, 100% of the 1000 students completed the PRCA and the PRPSA; 99% completed the CSRS-Student Version; observers completed CSRS-Observer assessments on 73% of the students; and 47% of parents completed the CSRS-Parent Version. In the Summer of 1997, 1,274 students attended orientation sessions and 1,167 participated in the oral communication assessment. Specifically, 99.4% of the 1,167 students completed the PRCA, 97.9% completed the PRPSA; and 96.3% completed the CSRS-Student Version; observers completed CSRS-Observer assessments on 98% of the students; and 38% of parents completed the CSRS-Parent Version.

The number of assessment values we had to work with to identify branch recommendations was significantly large. We used eight primary assessment scores (the PRCA, the PRPSA, student, parent and observer versions of the CSRS, and the student, parent and observer values from item 15 of the CSRS). We also had the benefit of four secondary scores; the PRCA can be subscored to reveal levels of apprehension in the contexts of groups, meetings, conversation and public speaking. Therefore, in total, we worked with approximately 12,000 assessment scores, up to 12 for each of the 1000 students participating.

On the basis of triangulated results derived from the Oral Communication Assessment Program, the following numbers of recommendations for the specified branches of the basic communication course program were made to students and advisors for courses available in the Spring of 1997: recommendations for the

Reticent Program: 176; recommendations for the Basic, Skill-Intensive Program: 43 (this number may be misleading; students who have been assessed as skill deficient and reticent are recommended for the Reticent Program); recommendations for testing out: 19; and recommendations for the Standard Program: 726 (see Table 3).

Table 3
Branch Recommendations

Reticent	Skill- Incentive	Standard	Branch	Branch
Phase One				
1995/1996	n= 77	N/A	n=685	N/A
Phase Two				
1996/1997	n=176	n=43*	n=762	n=19
Phase Three				
1997-1998	n=296	n=61	n=763	n=170**

* This number may be misleading; students who have been assessed as skill deficient *and* reticent are recommended for the Reticent Program.

** This number includes students who have been admitted to the Honors College, but have not been assessed as reticent. The potentially-reticent honors students are included under the Reticent Branch heading.

DISCUSSION

If education in general, and general education in particular, are going to be the focus for ongoing assessment programs, we must continue, or in some institutions begin, to prepare for the outcomes of such programs. The calls for assessment and revision are loud and clear; however, the responses have been muted. As

educators, our foci are to attract, encourage the retention of, educate and prepare students for what lies ahead. The learning process is complicated enough; when competence variables are added, it is easy to see how and why our discussions end up off-track.

However, as Chesebro, et al. (1992) contended, "all students, and particularly at-risk students, must be able to participate actively, orally and literately, in the quest for educational excellence" (p. 345). At-risk students encounter unique communication challenges. Many have unusually high rates of limited English proficiency, possess nonstandard language variations or dialects, live in environments that restrict options and opportunities for the development of oral communication skills, have experienced prior educational failures that affect their readiness to communicate orally and have been caught in a system that often denies at-risk "red flags" (Chesebro, et al., 1992; National Center for Education Statistics, 1990).

Western Carolina University has an Oral Communication Assessment, Curriculum and Support Programs that instruct faculty not only how to recognize communication weaknesses, but also how to look for and address them. Most institutions stress either a core-specific General Education course in Oral Communication or a program in Speaking Across the Curriculum. We are successfully accomplishing both, and more.

According to *The National Communication Association's Criteria for the Assessment of Oral Communication* (1993), "Assessment of oral communication should view competence in oral communication as a gestalt of several interaction dimensions. At a minimum, all assessments of oral communication should include an assessment of knowledge, skills and individuals' attitudes toward communication" (p. 3). Because our program stresses skills and attitudes, these two dimensions are

privileged. However, knowledge assessment techniques are increasingly incorporated into course goals. Assessment outcomes should stress planning instructional strategies to address student strengths and weaknesses and evaluating the effectiveness of instructional programs (p. 4). Both of these criteria are incorporated into our program through pre-test/post-test assessment, ongoing focus groups with students taking the course, and ongoing course revision meetings. The Branch Program is an example of our commitment to meeting the needs of our students.

Support is provided across the university through the efforts made at achieving consistency regarding assessment descriptions and a common public speaking assessment tool. Additionally, the Director of Oral Communication Competence meets with individual departments to stress the request for consistency and to provide clarification of disseminated information.

Our intention is to track the students assessed during the Summer of 1996 across four years. Additionally, because the academic year 1997-1998 is the first requiring all students to take one of the basic communication courses, these students will be assessed longitudinally as well. The longitudinal information will be invaluable in generating the ongoing programmatic assessments for which we are being held accountable (and rightly so). Assessment and innovative solutions based on the outcomes must be dually implemented; one without the other provides an unbalanced view of our ultimate goal: the pursuit of academic excellence.

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